



*Every Word  
Has a Spirit*

Nanaimo District  
Secondary School

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This Elder Project  
generously funded by



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## Introduction

The Elder Project visited Nanaimo District Secondary School in February. It was one of the most profound learning experiences that I have been a part of in my 17 years as an educator. This project created a rare but invaluable opportunity for Aboriginal youth to spend quality time with local Aboriginal Elders. What I witnessed was the making of genuine connections, the building of community, the bridging of generations, the establishment of trust, and the creation of magic. There was a lot of laughter. And there were also tears. The stories that our Elders had to share were not always easy. But the youth were able to see in the Elders what resilience and strength really look and feel like.

Thanks to The Federation of BC Writers for supporting this project, and thanks to Wendy Morton for the gardens she has sowed all over the province and beyond with The Elder Project.

Anne Tenning, Vice Principal, Aboriginal Education, Nanaimo Ladysmith School District



## Bill White

I was born in Snuneymuxw in 1948,  
to Willie and Kay White.  
I used to walk down the school hallway,  
only seeing very few brown faces in a crowd of white.

I lived in a house built by my dad, painted by my mom,  
filled with love by family and friends, grandparents,  
aunts, uncles, cousins.  
I never felt like I had a bad childhood—  
because I had them.

“You are loved,” I was told every day and I was.

My dad was a logger, a lacrosse player, a great father.

I was the first coordinator of Indian Education  
in the province.  
I was the first Aboriginal Liaison Officer at UVic  
I was the first First Nations person  
to go to South Africa.

I've had a long, lucky life.  
I was the first to do many things.

I've worked with Elders since the 70s.  
They've taught me so much:  
all the traditions they could remember.  
They've taught me all the lessons they learned.  
But I'm old now, and it's my turn to share.

## Louise White

I was born in Ahousaht.  
I had three older brothers,  
seven younger brothers  
and four younger sisters.

I always spent time with my Grandma Mary.  
She didn't speak English, only our language.  
I learned a lot from her.

She would tell me that  
it's not the way of our people  
to take their own lives.  
Also, to never forget where you're from.

In residential school I couldn't hear  
the sound of the water.

It made me feel very sad, empty.  
Before, I used to fall asleep to the sounds of waves.  
It made me feel at peace.

I like to say I'm not a survivor, I'm a thriver.  
You have to learn to love and accept yourself.

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**KAITLYN MCMAHON-WHITE**





## *Sally Williams*

I am 60, born in Alert Bay.

I lived in Hopetown and was raised there.

My parents were Elise and Fred.

I lived in a small community, a house on the beach  
with old cedar wood.

I was only seven when I was separated from my siblings.

We are all one spirit, one mind, one heart.

We are all related.

Respect is our main spirit.

The main teachings are how to nurture, protect, uplift our spirits.

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**DANIEL ECK**



## Hammumu

I was born in Heiltsuk territory.  
I moved to Awikinuxv when I was two.  
Community always came first.  
The community is who I became.

Although the community never changed, family did.  
My siblings went to school and my dad died.  
But hard times teach gratitude and hope.  
Hard times give us strength.

I was taught acceptance.  
I was taught cultural citizenship and humility.  
I was taught honour, faith and spirituality.  
I was taught love.  
I am my history.

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**SKYLAR CARLSTON**



## Jerry Brown

I was born in Nanaimo, raised with mom, dad, grandma, grandpa.  
I was never taught to lose. I was taught to win. A perfect childhood.

My father taught me how to hunt duck and deer. I still hunt today.

I was raised in a pretty big house by the water.  
Six sisters, one brother.  
My mom and dad were fluent in the language and culture.  
I went to NDSS. Teachers always helped me.

I was a welder, then I built houses, then I was a chief.  
Now I'm a teacher.

I learned everything from my Elders: not to be angry, not to swear,  
to be kind to my brother and sisters.

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**LEESA DAVID**

## Fran Tait

I am from Lax Kw'alaams, Port Simpson.  
I belong to the Laxsgiik Clan,  
the Eagle Clan on my mother's side.  
My father came from the Raven Clan.

I was sent to residential school in Port Alberni  
when I was five years old.  
From grade 1 to grade 6  
I never left the residence.  
I had to get up at 5 a.m., set the table,  
get on my uniform, go to school.

"Don't do that. Do you want a strapping?  
Do you have permission?"  
Everything was negative.  
The boys and girls were always separated.

When I was older, I went to see the house in Lax Kw'alaams  
where I spent four years. My sister died in the house.  
My father died of TB. My mom was murdered.

I remember nothing about my childhood at home.  
I didn't go to family gatherings until I was in my 20s.  
I asked my aunt and she was patient.  
My whole life was hard: I was addicted to alcohol,  
had difficulties with relationships,  
was discriminated against for the colour of my skin.

But the good things: my children, my grandchildren,  
retiring from being an advisor at Malaspina College  
for 32 years, dragon boating, tribal journeys,  
starting things and finishing them.

---

**COURTNEY JOHNSON**





## Stephanie Thomas

I grew up on the reserve in Nanaimo.  
I was the eldest of my six siblings.  
Our family adopted two more children.

Trauma and hard times  
have been part of my whole life,  
my family's life.

Both my parents lost their mothers  
when they were very young.

School was always an ugly place.  
For my parents it was sinister.  
They suffered abuse in every form.

For me, every day was hard.  
The teachers were awful.  
The other kids teased us, we never got along.  
They called us stink squaws, dirty Indians.  
I was called that every day.  
Education was nothing to me.

I learned from listening to the Elders,  
the stories in the Big House, Potlatches.

I've been making cedar hats, cedar flowers,  
wool blankets for 30 years.  
I know family is important: who we are,  
where we came from.

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**IAN MCMAHON-POINT**

## Joy Bremner

I am Cree-Métis.  
My grandmother—  
whom I called the Gentlewoman—  
and my mother took care of me.  
My grandmother was strong, quiet  
and always answered my questions.

I attended 24 schools before I graduated.  
I lived everywhere across Western Canada.  
I was always referred to as “the new kid.”

When we were kids, we were always outside:  
skating, playing ball.

I took on the mother role  
at a very young age.  
It is an important role for me.

The day my granddaughter was born  
was the best day of my life.  
I get to be the grandma now.

I am lucky.  
Everything has come full circle.

---

**TANISHA DOBOS**





## *Diana Doreen Sampson*

I lived on the Stz'uminus First Nation with my parents.  
I didn't go to residential school.  
My parents hid me under a bridge.  
I was afraid. I knew something was going on,  
but didn't know what it was.

I only spoke my own language, Hul'q'umi'num'.  
I had trouble understanding at school.  
A special teacher taught me English  
in the corner of the classroom.  
I walked five miles to and from school.  
I didn't want to take the bus  
because the other kids would push us, kick us,  
then call us names we didn't understand.

I spent time with my mom and dad  
on the fishing boat.  
I was taught to live off the land and water.  
I learned to respect the land, respect the people  
and everything around you.

Now, I work teaching toddlers  
the Hul'q'umi'num' language.  
I work in First Nations court.  
I help students find their way in life.

I would like to tell people to learn  
everything they can, to just keep going.  
If you know your family roots, your family history,  
it keeps you spiritually strong.

---

**KEELY CARLSTON**

## Elizabeth Tenning

I was born on the reserve.  
I lived with my grandparents.  
My grandparents' house  
looked like a barn.

The whole family lived in a large, open area.  
I had two sisters, one brother.  
They are gone now.  
We had family gatherings.  
I learned how to respect my Elders.

My childhood was crappy.  
I didn't have a life.  
I went to Kuper Island Residential School  
from age five to 15.

I have no good memories of going there.

I used to be a nurse's aide.  
I was good at housekeeping.  
I used to be a Cowichan knitter.

My happiest memories  
were watching my children grow up.

At my daughter's graduation,  
I was the only one standing up, cheering.

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**EMMA HUBERT**





## *Grace Elliott Nielsen*

I was born on Elliott Point.  
I was raised on a farm with my Mom, Dad,  
brothers and sisters.

I loved the water, fishing, hunting, hiking.  
I liked to eat from the ocean and forest.  
I loved the longhouse: the singing, drumming.  
I used to crawl in and hide in the bleachers.  
I always fell asleep. It was so peaceful.

My teaching came from my mother:  
"There was never such thing as can't.  
Every word has a spirit, so be careful how you use them.  
Always respect and look after your Elders."

I went to Ladysmith to school by boat.  
It was difficult.  
There was a lot of racism in the school.  
The teachers were bad.

When I finished school,  
I went into nursing.  
I worked at Nanaimo Indian Hospital,  
then Nanaimo General Hospital.

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**SHELDON UNGER**

## Lolly Good

I was born February 21, 1947.  
I lived in Snuneymuxw all my life.  
The house I lived in was built by my father.  
I had six sisters, two brothers.

My mother always had a leather belt.  
My family was very strict.  
They were residential school survivors.

In our house it was three to a bed;  
it wasn't very healthy.  
I felt disconnected.

I went to Port Alberni Residential School.  
I ran away after three years.

Now, my life is moving forward.

I did hairdressing and was a care aide.  
Today I am an Elder in Residence in the schools.

My goal is to pave a better road  
for my children, my grandchildren.  
To teach children to use their voices  
and be heard,  
in a good way.

---

**MILES COULTER**





## *Violet George*

I was born in Hesquiaht,  
raised by my parents, grandparents.

My family of 15 lived in a big white house.  
We shared it with my Uncle Paul.

We had a big garden.  
We grew potatoes, carrots, onions.  
The kids would watch the adults dance and sing  
from the staircase.

My parents were living proof of love and respect.  
But most of my childhood  
was spent in residential school.  
I got to know my brothers and sisters there.

I was a tomboy.  
I started fishing when I was 11.  
I enjoyed my childhood.

I knew my husband all my life.  
He proposed in Tofino.  
We were married for 56 years.

You have to love yourself  
before you can love anyone else.

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**KEANU JOHNSON, TANISHA DOBOS**

## William Tse khun e qun Good

I was born in Nanaimo,  
raised by my mother, my grandfather.  
It was wonderful, horrible.

I lived by the Nanaimo River,  
on the Nanaimo Number 3 Reserve.  
I grew up in an old wood house, no running  
water, no electricity. We had an outhouse.  
We had a well, used buckets to get water.  
We had a wood stove. My brother and I  
cut down trees, stored the wood.

I had two brothers, eight sisters.  
My great grandfather was a chief  
of the Snuneymuxw First Nation.

I went to public school.  
I was beaten at lunch and recess,  
chased home from school.  
By the time I was in grade 4,  
I learned to fight back.

All I wanted from the beginning,  
was to be friends with everyone.

I have worked in a kitchen.  
I have worked as a heavy duty mechanic.  
I was a driver of a van. I worked in a sawmill.  
I have been a carver, a storyteller, a teacher.

---

**JOHNATHAN SULLIVAN**





## *Stella Johnson*

My siblings and I were raised by my grandmother.  
I grew up with my siblings.  
I did a lot of fighting,  
which probably led to disciplinary writing.

But I was a rebel with a cause.  
For that I got applause.  
I never felt like a lost cause.

I love the way I lived my life.  
I have no regrets.

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**JAMES BROWN**



## *Acknowledgments*

Anne Tenning thought that it would be a good idea to do an Elder Project in Nanaimo, where she is the vice principal of Aboriginal Education. She put together a team to organize the Elders and the students at Nanaimo District Secondary School. The students were eager and enthusiastic. When the Elders arrived, the magic happened. The students sat with them, asked them questions and turned their conversations into these poems.

I would like to thank Anne Tenning for her consistent enthusiasm for this project and Michelle Sokoloski, who organized the Elders and took photographs. Emily Recalma recruited the students and acted as my helper and guide. My thanks also to Lara Graaten and Justin Mark for their help, and to Laura Tait who supported this project. Thank you to the ABED staff at NDSS, for all you did to make this project a success.

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*Nendy Morton*



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